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ABSTRACT

Catholic schools serve both religious and national interests, and should be supported by the government as well as by the church and tuition-paying parents. To improve government support, government-aided financing plans and improved public attitudes toward education must become a matter of major public policy. Among the financing options that have been suggested are (1) educational savings accounts; (2) the release of IRAs for dependents' education; (3) education vouchers; (4) tuition tax credits; (5) teacher tax credits to encourage teachers to remain in the profession; (6) family credits for families in which one spouse stays home to support the educational activity of children; (7) improved student financial aid; and (8) double tax deductibility for gifts to private schools. An effective partnership between government and families would require each party to acknowledge the importance of the other and to try to influence the other positively for education. Data about school effectiveness, including that of private schools, should be made readily available. Information about education in countries like the Soviet Union and Japan should also be examined for clues to effective parent-government partnership. (PGD)

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NEEDED: A NEW EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP
BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND FAMILIES

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NEEDED: A NEW EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIP
BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND FAMILIES

by William J. Byron, S.J.

"If you think education is expensive," commented one harried educator to inflation-weary parents, "try ignorance!" The high social cost of illiteracy and the permanent economic disadvantages of inadequate schooling are obvious. Even more obvious is the fact that education at all levels is costly. Few would argue, however, that education costs are not worth meeting.

It is important to distinguish price and cost in any discussion of education. In public education, the price is low but the costs are high. In private education, the price is high but the actual costs are often lower than the real costs of public education. In each sector, a costly service is being provided. In neither sector does price cover cost. Subsidies are required in each instance--from taxpayers for public education, from financial contributors (and from teachers content to work for lower pay) in independent schools and colleges. It is simply incorrect to say that private schools "cost more" than public schools. They are indeed higher priced and those who choose private schools, for religious or other reasons, must pay the higher price. This is a major concern and formidable challenge facing Catholic families in the United States today.

In American private education there is a strong and significant Catholic presence at all levels. The question facing Catholics today is how to maintain that presence. Their schools serve both Church and nation. They deserve support from both. The Church is doing its part. The nation, particularly its government at all levels, should be doing more. And still more will have to be done both by committed Catholics and by various dispensations and devices available to a sympathetic government.

I know a Catholic parish in Kentucky which runs a tuition-free elementary school ("Why charge our parents at a time in their lives when they are least able to pay?" asks the pastor) by applying 60 percent (on the way down to 50 percent as parish giving increases) of parish income to school support. And this by general consent of the parish community.

In suburban Philadelphia, a tuition-charging parish school received in a recent year tuition revenue of \$220,000 but faced costs of \$670,000 despite very low teachers' salaries. I suggested to the pastor the possibility of finding eight wealthy parishioners each willing to endow a "chair" for a teacher in his parish school. This would ease the strain on parish revenues, make higher salaries possible, and provide memorial opportunities for grateful parishioners who could afford six-figure gifts that would assure the continuation of Catholic education in the parish. Endowed chairs for elementary school teachers could be established by bequests of \$100,000. The number of elderly parishioners capable of making such a provision is not to be

underestimated. Neither is the size of the bequest. Where there is a will, there is a very effective way of establishing such chairs.

There are Catholic schools everywhere which operate openly under something of a Robin Hood ethic--charge full fare to those who can pay, give discounts and even free rides to those who cannot. The rich subsidize the poor. This should continue; it is simply a question of degree. How much is enough?

Catholic colleges, like independent colleges everywhere, look to alumni and friends for help in warding off deficits. Catholic secondary schools are doing the same. Catholic elementary schools can no longer afford to ignore their alumni, nor can they rely on raffles and candy sales for the delivery of needed supplemental revenue.

Catholics are generous and uncomplaining in their support of Catholic schools, but they deserve more relief than they are now getting as they struggle to keep Catholic education alive and well in this country. Here are some ideas which, if embodied in public policy, could ease the burden.

- 1) Educational Savings Accounts, with the same tax advantages as Individual Retirement Accounts, could encourage and reward savings for education.
- 2) IRAs themselves could be modified by law to permit early spending, without penalty, for the education of the IRA holder's dependent

child. The price to be paid, of course, would be the loss of retirement income; the intent of the original savings plan would be frustrated. It should be noted that the new IRA--i.e., the post-April 15, 1987 product of the Tax Reform Act of 1986--is both less deductible and considerably more complicated. Most of the revisions brought about by changes in the law are aimed at converting the IRA from being primarily a tax shelter to becoming a true retirement vehicle.

- 3) Education vouchers have been much discussed; they deserve a try. Proponents of voucher plans find the acoustics on Capitol Hill very poor. Public school lobbyists have no enthusiasm for the idea.
- 4) Tuition tax credits are particularly attractive for elementary and secondary school parents, but we have not been successful in organizing the political will needed to make them a reality.
- 5) Teacher tax credits, not to be confused with tuition tax credits, is a policy idea which families should support when they dialogue with income-taxing governments. If good education enhances the productivity of the

American economy, I wonder why a case could not be made for granting "teacher tax credits" to those who provide that education in much the same way that "investment tax credits" have been offered to those who create jobs and enlarge the nation's productive capacity. A teacher tax credit would attract and retain good people in the classroom while easing the pressure for higher pay for teachers from their schools' (private and public) already strained funding sources.

- 6) When both spouses work, the second paycheck is often devoted to "putting the kids through college." I think a new policy option is needed whereby a second-paycheck parent, who chooses to, could devote full time to child care and be rewarded for that "national service" with higher education benefits (like the G.I. Bill of Rights) applicable to College tuition for the grown child or tuition for the parent interested in advancing his or her own higher learning. It will take awhile for that idea to catch on. If and when it does, poorer families will not benefit from it since many of them are headed by single parents, and even where both parents are

present, their poverty compels both to work outside the home. In any case, absent a coherent and comprehensive national family policy in the U.S., it is quite unlikely that a "family credit" idea like this one will even get a hearing.

- 7) I would like to see a radical restructuring of student aid in higher education to help poor and middle class students who are willing to work their way through college. I would simply reverse the sequence: attend college first, work later; and from earnings received for work, graduates would pay back the government-provided "advance" which paid their college expenses. This would be an income-contingent payback plan. The Reagan Administration has proposed a misnamed "Income Contingent Loan" (ICL) program which is not really income-contingent, but rather income sensitive. If income is low, the payback period (and interest payments) simply runs on longer; the loan obligation is in no way reduced. I have in mind something in-between a grant and a loan--call it an "advance" and note that the amount paid back, not the rate of payback, is contingent on

post-graduation income. The "advance" would come from a federal revolving fund. The pay-back would be automatic by means of a withholding tax on gross earnings administered by IRS. Defaults would not be a major problem because in this plan the only way to avoid repayment would be tax evasion. Moreover, this plan would lift the college tuition burden from the shoulders of parents while making sufficient funds available to students to attend the college of their choice. Given the remarkable changes in both the American family and the American economy, this may be the best way to go.

- 8) Another policy proposal, ill-timed perhaps in an era of yawning deficits in the federal budget and reluctant tax reformers in city, state and federal legislative bodies, is the "double deductibility" idea. Parents with children in private schools complain of "double taxation" insofar as their taxes support public schools and their tuition payments support private schools. Is it fantasy to suggest that their tax-deductible donations to private schools (not tuition payments, just gifts) be given double

deductibility? This would mean that a \$100 gift could be listed as a \$200 deduction.

New ideas are needed to answer the troubling question of how to pay for Catholic education at all levels. Parents, in exercising their rights as citizens, will have to convince the policymakers of the merit of their new ideas. As stewards of wealth, affluent Catholics will have to stretch a bit to endow Catholic educational efforts. Meanwhile, the religious communities and their dedicated lay colleagues will have to recommit themselves to, and recruit others for, the undercompensated but indispensable work of staffing the Catholic educational enterprise at all levels. Everyone in the Catholic community will have to subsidize the effort in one way or another. Without the subsidy, the enterprise will not survive.

There is, it seems to me, a present need for a new educational partnership between government and families in the U.S. I understand a partnership to be an arrangement where there is reciprocal influence and mutual dependency. The educational partnership I have in mind acknowledges that government really depends on parents for education to happen, and families really depend on government if their educational responsibilities are going to be met. Moreover, both government and families are each going to have to remain open to the influence (not the control, but the influence) of the other, if a workable educational partnership is to be maintained.

Catholic parents should influence their government's education policies; if they do not, they are not meeting satisfactorily their duties as citizens. Government policies should exert a positive influence on Catholic citizen-parents' intent on exercising their parental right to educate and their citizens' right to assistance from government. Without such assistance, they cannot meet adequately their educational responsibilities toward their children (who, of course, are also citizens).

Many families fail on their side of the partnership equation because they make no effort to influence government. They have yet to learn the lesson contained in the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom that "in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from activity in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits" (No. 2). The Council did not spell out those "due limits." They are there, of course. Religious freedom does not apply in an unrestricted way to religious practice, or to claims on government for subsidy in the area of religious education. It should be noted, however, that the issue of religious freedom arises in the political order which is the order of human rights. Families should be active in the political order because it is precisely in and through that order that they find protection for their human rights, including the right of a parent to provide for the education of a child. Catholics will never discover the "due

limits" on religious freedom in this regard unless families become more active in the policy arena pursuing workable forms of government assistance for Catholic education. As Archbishop Rembert Weakland put it in a February 5, 1987 address to the Wisconsin Assembly (the state legislature), although "no church should align itself with a political party," still "religious bodies do ask for the freedom to be themselves and to take part fully in the life of society without being discriminated against by legislation that would seem to exclude them."

Some educational legislation should exclude them, of course. There are "due limits" on what government can do. Moreover, the state may have a right to put a limit on religious practice on some occasions in the name of public order, of health and safety. On the other hand, the state may have a right, well within limits set by First Amendment restrictions, to intervene positively in the name of the common good. Such positive interventions might take the form of policies that could ease the financial burden on families intent on providing a complete education for their children in a setting that is not completely secular.

Both "public order" and "common good" might be invoked to rally government support for parents who in turn want to support an educational effort which fits the following statistical portrait assembled by Dr. Alfred J. Lightfoot, professor of education at Loyola-Marymount University:

- 97% average daily attendance at Catholic Schools as compared to 67% average daily attendance at public schools.

- 80% of Catholic school graduates go on to higher education while the drop-out rates in public schools such as Los Angeles, fluctuate between 40-65% with a system average of 43%.
- 78% of Catholic schools provide basic in-service training on a yearly basis for its teachers as compared to the public schools average of 60%.
- 99% of Catholic schools and less than 10% of the public schools have a written statement of standards for student behavior which is given to each student and parent.
- 99% of Catholic schools have rules about student dress, prohibiting students from leaving the school grounds during class hours, and prohibiting smoking in or around school. In public schools, enforcement of any of these rules is virtually impossible.

These statistics both cheer the hearts and whet the appetite for government help on the part of families now sacrificing to preserve Catholic schools. But how do we know these percentages are precise? The fact is we really don't know very much, statistically speaking, about the relative merits of Catholic and public education in this very big country of ours. In 1867, then-representative, later president James A. Garfield persuaded Congress to mandate the executive branch of our national government to report regularly to the citizens of our country on "the condition and progress of education in the several states and territories." In the spirit of partnership--reciprocal influence and mutual dependency--families should be calling on the federal government, the only entity capable of the measurement task, to generate the data. Diane Ravitch argued well for this in The Washington Post on September 4, 1986 in an article deploring federal neglect of "the collection of data, the conduct of

research and the dissemination of reliable information" about education in America.

Only the federal government has both the means and the capacity to determine how much and how well our children are learning; whether they have achieved the level of literacy necessary to function effectively in society; whether they are learning history and geography, science and mathematics, and how they compare with their age-mates in other industrialized nations. Only the federal government can sponsor national research to tell us about trends in the teaching force: How many teachers possess what kinds of backgrounds and qualifications? How many are teaching subjects they themselves have studied? How many teachers will be needed in the next decade?

Comparisons with schooling in other nations is always instructive. Such comparisons can generate agenda for two-way discussion between families and governments about education. The Soviets, for example, seem to be more serious than we are about science in the schools. All Soviet secondary school students take two years of calculus. The Soviet school year is longer than ours. And so many more Soviet students study English than U.S. students study Russian that mere mention of comparative data is an embarrassment in this country.

Behind all of this is rigid governmental policy enforcement on the Soviet side and parental unconcern on the American side. Our non-police state, democratic policy formation process awaits the stimulus of widespread parental concern for more rigor in the classroom; more mathematics, science and foreign language in the curriculum; and, indeed, more homework demands imposed on children by their schoolmasters (not a bad word to resurrect for our present purposes!).

Japanese schooling shows itself to be much more open to and dependent upon parental involvement than we might suspect, based on the relatively passive role for parents we have come to take for granted here in America. One important Japanese cultural consideration is enlightening in this regard. A recent U.S. Department of Education study, "Japanese Education Today," notes that in Japan, "the community's perception of a woman's success as a mother depends in large part on how well her children do in school." The negative, even destructive effects of too much parental pressure are obvious and to be avoided. But the positive benefits of reinforcement at home of the work going on, day by day, in school, are not sufficiently appreciated in the American family.

"The cultural environment is the significant factor in Japanese education," writes Dr. Merry White in The Japanese Educational Challenge (The Free Press). "If we want to borrow anything from the Japanese," she comments, "it is, paradoxically, the attention they devote to their own paramount cultural priority: the improvement of children."

In Japan, the mother serves as an auxiliary teacher, for all practical purposes. We might be amused to discover that the most popular home study desk in Japanese households has both a built-in calculator and a buzzer to summon the child's mother for help and snacks! (See "Lessons the U.S. Could Learn" and "Why the Cultural Element is Key" in a special section on "Japanese Education," The Christian Science Monitor, February 8, 1987, pp. 25-26.)

There is indeed a need in America for a new partnership between families and government for the advancement of all education. Each side should be more open to influence from the other, otherwise no true partnership will emerge. Catholic families need not only to overcome some political reticence, but they, together with all other Americans, must raise education to a much higher rung on their ladder of political priorities. In Japan, adults (not just parents of school-age children) rank education very close to the top of their political concerns. As a consequence, average salaries for teachers in Japan compare favorably to those of private-sector professionals.

Despite all our rhetorical protests about the importance of schooling, both Catholic and public, in America, we seem unwilling to pay the price that good schooling requires. This brings us back to the point where the present discussion began. Catholic families need help from government to finance the Catholic education of their young. No one should presume that some such help is constitutionally or politically out of the question. But Catholic families are also going to have to demand more from themselves--more of their own money, deductible or not, for their schools; and more of their own time in systematic, intensive, at-home involvement of parents with their children to reinforce, for more lasting results, the daily work being done in the Catholic schools.